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## IX.—THE DATE OF CHAUCER'S *MEDEA*.

In the *Publications of the Modern Language Association* for March, 1909,<sup>1</sup> I tried to show reason for believing that Chaucer's *Legend of Medea* was written later than the *Man of Law's Prologue*, and that hence the date of its composition must fall some time after 1390, when the poet was already engaged on the *Canterbury Tales*. In the following number of the same journal<sup>2</sup> Professor G. L. Kittredge replied to my paper with a thorough-going denial. Professor Kittredge's name rightly carries with it so great an authority,—particularly in matters pertaining to Chaucer,—that, if I am still to maintain my position, I must consider his objections and show why I cannot hold them valid. Whatever may be the final verdict of scholars as to the date of *Medea*, the issue involves so many questions which throw light on Chaucer's methods of work that a full discussion of it cannot be without profit.

### I.

The argument of my former paper may be restated as follows: The *Man of Law's Prologue* contains what purports to be a list of stories which may be found in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women*. This list mentions seven stories which, we have every reason to believe, Chaucer never wrote;<sup>3</sup> while its reference to the story of *Medea* misrepres-

<sup>1</sup> 24, 124-153.

<sup>2</sup> 24, 343-363.

<sup>3</sup> Deianira, Hermione, Hero, Helen, Briseis, Laodamia, Penelope. I omit Alcestis, whose 'wyfhod,' though not exemplified by a story of her life, is at least 'comended with the beste' in the Prologue. Mr. Kittredge can hardly have meant seriously his suggestion (p. 361, n. 1) that since Helen, Hero, Laodamia, and Penelope are named in the *balade* and

sents both the spirit and content of her legend as Chaucer has given it to us. This reference, in its general tone and in its mention of hanging by the neck as the manner of Medea's murder of her children, is strongly reminiscent of Jean de Meun's epitome of the Medea story in the *Roman de la Rose*.<sup>1</sup> This would seem to show that when Chaucer wrote the *Man of Law's Prologue* the version of the story most prominent in his memory was that in the *Roman de la Rose* rather than his own *Legend of Medea*, or the versions given by Guido in the *Historia*, or by Ovid in the *Heroides*, which served as the sources of his legend. If so, the *Legend of Medea* was written later than the *Man of Law's* reference to it. This argument I sought to corroborate by showing that Chaucer's acquaintance with the story of Medea before he undertook to write her legend was, *so far as his allusions to her story show*, mainly derived from the *Roman de la Rose*. Of the five allusions to the myth found in poems antedating the Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* four are traceable to this source, while the fifth, a mere mention of Jason and Medea as personages in the story of Troy, is to be traced either to Benoit or Guido, though it does not *in itself* show evidence that Chaucer had read the version of either. Before Chaucer wrote his *Legend*, as late even as his composition of the story of Palamon and Arcite, he associated Medea primarily with the *Roman de la Rose*. The *Man of Law's* misleading reference shows the same mental association. Had Chaucer already written his *Legend of Medea*, which, based primarily on Guido, shows no indebtedness to Jean de Meun's meagre epitome, this mental association could hardly have survived.

Deianira, Briseis, and Penelope are alluded to in the *House of Fame*, *Troilus*, or *Anelida*, Chaucer 'could allege that he had at least spoken of every one of the heroines whom the *Man of Law* names (save Hermione alone)—“if not in o book,” then at all events “in another.”’

<sup>1</sup> ll. 14198-14203.

It has seemed necessary to restate my argument thus fully, since Professor Kittredge has, in part at least, misunderstood its direction. The starting-point for the whole discussion is the puzzling discrepancy between Chaucer's *Legend of Medea* and the Man of Law's reference to it:—

The crueltee of thee, queen Medea,  
Thy litel children hanging by the hals  
For thy Jason, that was of love so fals.

Chaucer's legend not only fails to recount this episode, but also, far from presenting Medea's 'crueltee,' consistently emphasizes her 'kindness.' This discrepancy Professor Kittredge seeks to minimize. 'The Man of Law remarks that if we turn to Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* we shall see "the cruelty of Queen Medea,—her little children hanging by the neck." We consult the *Legend of Hypsipyle and Medea* (which is one continuous narrative)<sup>1</sup> and find that, although Chaucer does not expressly say that Medea hanged her children, he does make Hypsipyle forecast their murder in outspoken terms.'<sup>2</sup> Hypsipyle's forecast consists of a single line in her prayer for vengeance against her rival:—

And that she moste bothe her children spille.<sup>3</sup>

This hardly seems to be a sufficient justification for the Man of Law's specific statement that Chaucer's *Legend* shows us Queen Medea in her very act of cruelty.<sup>4</sup> Of the other

<sup>1</sup> The Man of Law, however, refers to the two stories separately. Cf. my former article, p. 137.

<sup>2</sup> P. 355.

<sup>3</sup> *Legend of Good Women*, 1574. (Quoted by me, p. 124.)

<sup>4</sup> It is not a case in point to adduce the Man of Law's inaccurate reference to Gower's story of Apollonius. We expect a poet to know his own writings more accurately than he does those of another. Moreover, Chaucer had an obvious motive for exaggerating (playfully no doubt) the immorality of Gower's tale.

element of discrepancy, the Man of Law's emphasis of Medea's cruelty, Professor Kittredge says nothing.

Professor Kittredge accepts my contention that the words of the Man of Law are based on a passage in the *Roman de la Rose*, a passage, it may be noticed, which explains not only the choice of hanging by the neck as the means of Medea's crime, but also the emphasis of her cruelty :

Dont ses enfans, quant el le sot,  
 Por ce que de Jason les ot,  
 Estrangla de duel et de rage,  
 Dont el ne fist mie que sage,  
*Quant el lessa pitié de mère*  
*Et fist pis que marastre amère.*

He declines, however, to accept my conclusion that when Chaucer wrote the *Man of Law's Prologue* he associated the name of Medea primarily with the *Roman de la Rose*. Though not challenging my evidence that four of Chaucer's five allusions to the story of Medea are traceable to this source, he contends on other grounds that before Chaucer composed the *Legend of Good Women* he must have read the story of Medea in other versions than that of Jean de Meun—in the *Roman de Troie* of Benoît, in the *Heroides* and *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, in Gower's *Confessio Amantis*.

Before taking up Mr. Kittredge's argument in detail, it will be well to scrutinize somewhat carefully its bearing on the question involved—the question as to whether Chaucer's mental associations with the story of Medea were mainly those of the *Roman de la Rose*. To controvert the evidence furnished by the allusions which tends to prove such an association, it is not sufficient to establish a probability that Chaucer had at some time read over the story of Medea in other works. It is necessary to establish a probability that he had read these other versions with some care and attention. The point at issue is not whether Chaucer's eye had

perused the lines of Benoit or of Ovid, but whether his mind had caught and retained an impression, such an impression as we know that he did receive from the *Roman de la Rose*.

Professor Kittredge adduces three passages in the *Book of the Duchess* which seem to have been derived from the latter part of Benoit's *Roman de Troie*,<sup>1</sup> and calls attention to the fact that Chaucer made use of the poem in the composition of *Troilus and Criseyde*. 'Is it credible,' he asks, 'that he had not read the beginning of the romance,<sup>2</sup> and that nevertheless he mentioned Jason and Medea . . . as characters in "the storie of Troye?"' The *Roman de Troie* contains 30,108 lines, and Chaucer was a busy man. When confronted with a work of such length, we moderns do not always feel ourselves in honor bound to read every page. Where interest or inclination prompts, we read carefully; for the rest we read rapidly or skip outright, merely glancing at the omitted portions sufficiently to see what they contain. It does not seem to me incredible that Chaucer should have done the same. Even if we grant that Chaucer had perused the book from beginning to end, it is surely not incredible that many portions of it should have failed to impress themselves deeply on his memory.

Similarly Professor Kittredge shows that in *Troilus* and in the *House of Fame* Chaucer already betrays some acquaintance with the *Heroides* of Ovid. 'It is clear,' he tells us, 'that when he wrote the *House of Fame*, Chaucer had read the second, third, sixth, seventh, ninth and tenth epistles of the *Heroides*. Had he sedulously refrained from reading the twelfth epistle (*Medea to Jason*), although he had long felt an interest in Medea's story, and although the sixth epistle (*Hypsipyle to Jason*), which he *did* read contains nearly as

<sup>1</sup> Already pointed out by Skeat in his notes, where they are referred to Guido.

<sup>2</sup> The story of Medea is told by Benoit in ll. 1199-2026.

much about Medea as about Hypsipyle?'<sup>1</sup> The positiveness of Mr. Kittredge's assertion is hardly justified by the evidence which he gives in its support. The evidence *proves* only that when Chaucer wrote *Troilus* he had read the epistle of CEnone (v), and that when he wrote the *House of Fame* he had read the epistle of Phyllis (ii) and probably also the epistles of Deianira (ix) and Ariadne (x),<sup>2</sup> and that he *knew* the titles of the third (Briseis), sixth (Hypsipyle), seventh (Dido), and twelfth (Medea) epistles.<sup>3</sup> It is surely begging the question to assert<sup>4</sup> that Chaucer 'had long felt an interest in Medea's story.' The only evidence that Mr. Kittredge can have for his statement must be the five allusions already referred to. They are at best rather perfunctory mentions of Medea's name. Whatever interest in her story they betray was apparently satisfied by Jean de Meun's epitome.

To prove that Chaucer must have read the account of Medea in the seventh book of *Metamorphoses*, Professor Kittredge presents a long and interesting list of passages which shows (what every student of Chaucer will be ready to admit) that the poet was familiar with Ovid's most famous work. Whether Chaucer had ever read the *Metamorphoses* straight through we cannot say. I shall not urge the fact that Mr. Kittredge has been unable to discover any trace of his acquaintance with Book VII. The division into books is an arbitrary one; Ovid's real unit is the episode. It is more likely that Chaucer read a fable here and a fable there than that he read the poem book by book. We may grant, if we please, the likelihood that he had at one time or

<sup>1</sup> P. 351.

<sup>2</sup> For Chaucer's brief mention of Deianira cf. *Roman de la Rose*, ll. 9945-9952.

<sup>3</sup> That Chaucer knew that the story of Medea was to be found in the *Heroides* I stated on p. 134 of my former paper.

<sup>4</sup> Mr. Kittredge repeats the assertion on p. 353.

another read over the episode of Medea. The fact remains—the only fact which bears directly on our argument—that neither in detail of action nor of phrase did it impress him sufficiently to influence his allusions to Medea and Jason,<sup>1</sup> or, to contribute a single touch to his *Legend of Medea*.

Mr. Kittredge next asserts that when Chaucer wrote the *Man of Law's Prologue* he had certainly read Gower's retelling of the Medea story in the *Confessio Amantis*. 'Had he read the story of Canace in the third book, and the story of Apollonius in the eighth book, and overlooked the story of Medea in the fifth? The question answers itself.' But does it? The *Confessio Amantis* was first published in 1390, and the Man of Law's reference to it seems to suggest that it had recently appeared.<sup>2</sup> This reference consists of a very general allusion to the substance of the Canace story, and a very explicit mention of an unpleasant detail of the Apollonius story which Gower does not give at all.<sup>3</sup> We may answer Mr. Kittredge's question by asking whether Chaucer really had read these stories at all, or whether he had merely glanced through the book and noted their inclusion. The *Confessio Amantis* contains over thirty-three thousand lines of graceful, but somewhat monotonous poetizing. It seems to me not in the least unlikely that Chaucer's quick and eager mind may have found the more pedestrian manner of

<sup>1</sup> This is all that I meant to assert in my footnote on p. 134,—that there is nothing in Chaucer's allusions to the Medea story to show that he was acquainted with the version in the *Metamorphoses* or that he knew of its existence. By taking my note apart from its context Mr. Kittredge has misunderstood my position.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Kittredge, p. 360.

<sup>3</sup> Gower tells the unpleasant portion of his story with a good deal of reticence and delicacy. I agree with Tatlock (*Development and Chronology*, p. 173, n. 2) that Chaucer must have had a confused recollection of a horrible touch in the original Latin version of the story. This would suggest that he read Gower's version very hurriedly if at all.

his fellow-poet tedious here and there, and that he may rather frequently have assumed the right which he specifically grants to readers of the *Canterbury Tales* to 'turne over the leef, and chese another tale.'<sup>1</sup>

The method of Professor Kittredge's argument seems to me to be open to grave objection. To argue that because Chaucer knew certain portions of an extended work it may be assumed that he was familiar with the whole, presupposes in Chaucer a methodical, conscientious thoroughness, a 'frigid mathematical accuracy,' to borrow Mr. Kittredge's own phrase, which is foreign to all that we know of his character and temper. If one decline to accept this argument as valid, Mr. Kittredge's assertion that 'he had read [the story of Medea] in some of these other works, and probably in all of them,' becomes a matter of mere general likelihood and conjecture. One cannot, of course, prove that he had *not* read the story in these versions; nor is such proof essential for my argument. There *is* ground for asserting that *if* he read these versions, they had made no lasting impression on his memory, that up to the time when he wrote his *Legend* the Medea story was connected in his mind primarily with the *Roman de la Rose*—a connection which still subsisted when he wrote the *Man of Law's Prologue*.

<sup>1</sup> We may compare Petrarch's letter to Boccaccio about the *Decameron*, written in 1373, more than twenty years after the *Decameron* was published. 'Your book . . . has fallen into my hands, I know not whence or how. If I told you that I had read it, I should deceive you. It is a very big volume, written in prose and for the multitude. I have been, moreover, occupied with more serious business, and much pressed for time. . . . What I did was to run through your book, like a traveller who, while hastening forward, looks about him here and there, without pausing. . . . As usual, when one looks hastily through a book, I read somewhat more carefully at the beginning and at the end.' (Robinson and Rolfe, *Petrarch, the First Modern Scholar and Man of Letters*, pp. 191-192.)

## II.

The contention that the *Legend of Medea* was written later than the *Man of Law's Prologue* carries with it the corollary that at least one of the legends, perhaps several of them, were written within the period when Chaucer was engaged on the *Canterbury Tales*. This theory Professor Kittredge brands as 'revolutionary.' 'The obvious and received opinion,' he says, 'with regard to the *Legend of Good Women* is that Chaucer dropped it to begin the *Canterbury Tales*. This opinion is *prima facie* impregnable. It cannot be shaken without positive evidence.'<sup>1</sup> These are strong words; let us see how far they are justified.

In 1870 ten Brink implied, though without attempt at proof, that Chaucer's work on the legends terminated in 1386.<sup>2</sup> In 1871 Furnivall conjectured that the Prologue was written in 1385, 'the rest at various times.'<sup>3</sup> In 1882 Bech concluded a long discussion of the matter with the statement: 'wir müssen auf ein bestimmtes datum [for the conclusion of Chaucer's work on the *Legend*] verzichten.'<sup>4</sup> In 1890 Koch definitely associated the abandonment of the *Legend* with the inception of the *Canterbury Tales*, though conjecturally and without attempt at proof.<sup>5</sup> In 1892 Lounsbury inclined to the opinion that the composition of

<sup>1</sup> P. 357. It is interesting to note that very recently, when Mr. Kittredge was himself engaged in combatting a received opinion (that Chaucer's praise of Alcestis was intended as a compliment to Queen Anne), he complained that 'when a particular suggestion of this kind has been put into type, it becomes a kind of dogma, and everybody expects those who reject it to "prevent the contrarye."' (*Modern Philology*, 6, 435.)

<sup>2</sup> *Studien*, p. 149. Repeated in his *Hist. of Eng. Lit.* (Eng. trans., 2, 116) and, qualified by the adverb 'vermutlich,' in *Eng. Stud.*, 17, 20.

<sup>3</sup> *Trial Forewords*, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup> *Anglia*, 5, 379.

<sup>5</sup> *Chronology*, p. 45.

the legends was 'contemporaneous . . . with that of the *Canterbury Tales*, instead of preceding them, as is commonly supposed.'<sup>1</sup> In 1894 Skeat implied rather vaguely that the last of the legends was composed by 1386.<sup>2</sup> In 1902 Bilderbeck tried to show that the legends were written at the rate of one a year between 1385 and 1394.<sup>3</sup> In 1905 Lowes argued that several, perhaps most, of the legends were composed before the Prologue.<sup>4</sup> In 1907 Tatlock contended that the legends were all written by 1387.<sup>5</sup> Koch's opinion that the *Legend* was abandoned in favor of the *Canterbury Tales* has been echoed with varying degrees of assurance in several more popular presentations of Chaucerian chronology.<sup>6</sup>

It has seemed worth while to review the history of critical opinion, since the review makes clear that to several scholars the 'obvious and received opinion' has seemed neither obvious nor acceptable, while by others it has been adopted more or less confidently as a probable conjecture. The first scholar, so far as I can discover, to attempt a serious justification for the 'orthodox' opinion is Professor Tatlock. He has shown that the Prologue and the *Legend of Cleopatra* were known by Gower as early as 1390, and that the Prologue was known by Thomas Usk before 1388.<sup>7</sup> Mr. Kittredge, after declaring that the 'accepted view needs no defence,' nevertheless defends it at length. The portion of

<sup>1</sup> *Studies in Chaucer*, I. 418.

<sup>2</sup> Oxford Chaucer, 3, xliii.

<sup>3</sup> *Chaucer's Legend of Good Women*, London, 1902. Cf. Bech, *Anglia*, 5, 379.

<sup>4</sup> *Publ. Mod. Lang. Assoc.*, 20, 802-818.

<sup>5</sup> *Development and Chronology*, p. 130.

<sup>6</sup> Pollard, *Chaucer Primer*, p. 57; Ward, *Chaucer* (E. M. L.) pp. 99-100; Mather, *Prologue, etc.*, p. xxix.

<sup>7</sup> For his suggestion that Usk also knew the *Medea*, I tried to show in my former paper (pp. 133-139) that there is no sufficient ground.

his defence which tries to show 'how admirably it accounts for all the phenomena,' is, considered as argument, merely an elaborate begging of the question. Only one piece of positive evidence is advanced, a piece of evidence already presented by Dr. Tatlock in substantially the same form.<sup>1</sup> In the last book of the *Confessio Amantis* Gower presents, after the pattern of the conventional 'court of love' poetry, a scene in which Cupid appears leading in a vast throng 'of gentil folk that whilom were lovers.' These lovers are marshalled by two captains named 'Youthe' and 'Elde.' In the company of 'Youthe' are first enumerated eleven male lovers, accompanied by their ladies. Next follow the names of four men, 'which hadden be fortunéd sore in loves cause,' and of twelve women 'in the same cas.' These women are Dido, Phyllis, Ariadne, Deianira, Medea, Deidamia, Cleopatra, Thisbe, Progne and Philomela, Canace, Polyxena. Then are mentioned as 'of other port,' Circe and Calypso. Lastly, in the company of 'Youthe,' come four 'chief ladies'—Penelope, Lucretia, Alcestis, and Alcyone, 'whos feith was proeved in her lyves.' There follows a shorter list of lovers in the company of 'Elde.'<sup>2</sup> 'Of Gower's eleven'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Development and Chronology*, pp. 128–129. Tatlock, however, states the argument more tentatively.

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Kittredge speaks of this whole passage as 'designedly reminiscent of Chaucer's *Legend*' (p. 362). Tatlock, more cautiously, says that the *Confessio* 'betrays vestiges of its influence' (p. 128). Mr. Macaulay, Gower's editor, who is not concerned with proving or disproving any thesis of Chaucerian chronology, while admitting that Gower may have seen the *Legend of Good Women*, is inclined to minimize the resemblance. After pointing out the considerable differences between the *Legend* and the passage in Gower, he concludes that 'if our author had any particular model before him, it may quite as well have been the description in Froissart's *Paradys d'Amours*.' He considers it 'likely enough' that the peculiar manner of Cleopatra's death may have been a reminiscence of Chaucer's *Legend*. (*Works of Gower*, 3, 545–547.)

<sup>3</sup> He counts Progne and Philomela as one.

star-crossed heroines,' Mr. Kittredge writes, 'seven have their stories told in the *Legend* . . . the only omissions are Hypsipyle (whom Chaucer unites with Medea in one continuous narrative), Lucretia (omitted by Gower at this point in order to make her one of the Four Chief Ladies just below), and Hypermnestra.'<sup>1</sup> This, it is urged, tends to show that the *Legend*, as we have it, existed before the publication of the *Confessio* in 1390, and hence before the Man of Law's introduction was written. This evidence Professor Kittredge admits is not conclusive. Whatever force it may have is appreciably lessened when we note<sup>2</sup> that of the eighteen ladies whom Gower names—twelve 'star-crossed heroines,' two sorceresses, four 'Chief Ladies'—all but two have their stories told at length in the preceding books of Gower's own *Confessio Amantis*.<sup>3</sup> The omissions are Polyxena (to whose story Gower twice alludes)<sup>4</sup> and Cleopatra (where the influence of Chaucer seems probable). The two heroines of Chaucer's ten whom Gower fails to mention—Hypsipyle and Hypermnestra—are not mentioned anywhere in the *Confessio Amantis*. Gower's list tends to prove that at the time when he composed it he was acquainted with the Prologue and the *Legend of Cleopatra*. Any further inferences drawn from it as to Chaucer's *Legend* rest on a very uncertain foundation.

On examination, the 'obvious and received opinion' turns out to be opinion pure and simple, with only the most shadowy basis of positive evidence. Though not inherently impossible or improbable, it can hardly be considered as 'prima facie impregnable.' Let us look for a moment at

<sup>1</sup> Pp. 362-363.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Tatlock, p. 129 and Kittredge, p. 359.

<sup>3</sup> For the references see Macaulay's 'Glossary and Index of Proper Names.'

<sup>4</sup> *Confessio Amantis*, 4, 1693, ff., and 5, 7591, ff.

the 'revolutionary' opinion that some of the individual legends were written during the period of the *Canterbury Tales*. Mr. Kittredge admits that shortly after 1390, fired perhaps by the appearance of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Chaucer intended, at the time when he wrote the *Man of Law's Prologue*, to continue the *Legend of Good Women*. The 'revolutionary' opinion supposes nothing more startling than that Chaucer actually carried out part of his intention. Even Professor Kittredge is willing to believe that about 1394, well on in the *Canterbury* period, Chaucer found time to work on a thorough-going revision of the Prologue.<sup>1</sup>

The theory that the *Legend of Medea* was written later than the *Man of Law's Prologue* is in no way inconsistent with the known facts of Chaucerian chronology nor with general probability; it is a natural and obvious explanation of a puzzling discrepancy between Chaucer's poem and his own allusion to it; and, though not capable perhaps of absolutely conclusive proof, it has in its favor positive evidence which, I have tried to show, Professor Kittredge's objections do not invalidate.

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<sup>1</sup> If, as Mr. Kittredge thinks 'quite possible' (*The Date of Chaucer's Troilus*, Chaucer Society, 1909, pp. 51-52.), Chaucer had already begun to plan the *Canterbury Tales* as early as January, 1386, and at that time wrote a new stanza for his *Tragedies* with the intent of utilizing the work in his great collection, the whole of the *Legend*, including the earlier form of its Prologue, was written during the period of the *Canterbury Tales*.